The Battleground: Democratic Perspective

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Democratic Strategic Analysis:

By Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Matt Ogren

The findings from the most recent Battleground survey underscore the deep sense of anxiety and frustration that have defined the national mood for well over a decade now—anxiety over an economy that voters see as rigged against the interests of working Americans and their families; and intense frustration stemming from a political system, and a political class, that they perceive as unable or unwilling to act on the public’s behalf.

As the 2016 presidential campaign gets underway, Americans are searching for a leader who demonstrates not only a clear understanding of these fundamental challenges, but an appetite for addressing them head on. Seven years after the beginning of the great recession, Americans appear ready to treat the pernicious forces at work in the economy as the threats to security—both personal financial security and shared, national security—that they are. It is telling that even Republican candidates for President are now paying lip service to the topic of economic inequality, despite explanations for this crisis that fail to satisfy and policy prescriptions that only grow staler.

While these basic dynamics, along with an increasingly favorable demographic climate, appear to benefit the Democrats, it would be a mistake to take the outcome of the 2016 elections for granted. The partisan polarization of the electorate appears as intense as ever, complicating the ability of any major-party candidate to unite the country across such divisions. Nor can either party lay unique claim to the mantle of change at time when majorities of Americans—of all stripes—are looking to chart a new course.

And yet, while Democrats will be best served running a candidate with solid national security credentials—given the prominence of foreign policy matters in modern presidential elections and the GOP’s modest though persistent advantage on that front—domestic concerns are likely to continue dominating the issue agenda in 2016. To find success in 2016 and beyond, Democrats must pair bold, distinct policy solutions to the fundamental values that animate their vision: economic security, equal opportunity, and a fair shot at the American Dream.

The Political and Economic Climate

The President’s job approval numbers have reverted back to familiar levels, currently standing at 45% approve, 49% disapprove. These numbers have remained consistent throughout his second term, and appear unlikely to change much in either direction in the next eighteen months. After a spike in his approval rating following his re-election (50% approve, 47% disapprove in December 2012), the subsequent Battleground surveys have all registered his approval rating ranging at levels between 41% and 45% and his disapproval rating between 51% to 54%. While swing voters treat this measures as an expression of their dissatisfaction with the status quo (independents: 35% approve, 57% disapprove),
the President maintains sky-high ratings among African-Americans (90% approve, 7% disapprove) and solid ratings among Hispanics (57% approve, 32% disapprove). His approval rating among white voters is solidly net-negative, but the divide between white Millennials (those 35 and younger) and older white voters is an ominous sign for the Republican Party’s future and highlights the complexity of the GOP challenge, which is not just racial and ethnic, but generational too. Older whites are highly critical of President Obama (35% approve, 60% disapprove) but his ratings are essentially divided among white Millennials (43% approve, 47% disapprove). There is also a very large gender gap with men, of whom 40% approve and 54% disapprove, and women, of whom 50% approve and 44% disapprove.

Despite the peaks and valleys that characterize the President’s approval ratings among major subgroups of the electorate, voters of all parties and political persuasions remain fundamentally change-oriented, with majorities expressing high levels of dissatisfaction with the direction of the country. Only 26% say things are headed in the right direction, while 65% say things are headed off on the wrong track. Furthermore, a similar number express bleak economic prospects for the next generation, with 24% saying things will be better off and 69% saying they will not be, which has barely budged from December’s numbers despite several months of positive job growth (22% yes, 71% no). And beyond their long-term pessimism, voters remain uncertain that even the current conditions will last – 32% say they are very worried about the United States suffering an economic downturn, and another 40% say they are somewhat worried. Concerns are not entirely driven by party ID, as independents (42% say they are very worried) have higher rates of concern than Republicans (39%). Not surprisingly, economically marginalized groups like African American men (41% very worried) and blue collar women (38%) have the highest rates of concern, which could have implications for the 2016 electorate in regard to both turnout and persuasion.

Given voters’ dissatisfaction with the current political and economic climate, it is not surprising that most voters want the next President to focus on the economy (23%) and jobs (13%), largely unchanged from the Battleground poll conducted last December (29% economy, 14% jobs). Health care (10%), immigration (8%), and the deficit (8%) round out the domestic issue agenda, but are not dominant factors for most voters. The recent political conversation around ISIS and the Iran nuclear deal have led to an increase in voters citing foreign threats (12%), though even among Republicans (18%) these concerns are relatively limited.

In the near-term, disagreements between the White House and Congressional Democrats over the Trans-Pacific Partnership seem likely to dominate headlines, but Democrats need to pivot as fast as possible to articulating a comprehensive, powerful economic vision that unites and mobilizes the party and speaks to improved quality of life for American families. While Democrats maintain a lead on the core issue of jobs (49%-42%), Republicans are currently perceived as the party better suited to handle the economy by five points (49%-44%), though the GOP has had trouble converting their advantage on the economy into electoral dividends—at least in presidential elections. Democrats, despite taking intense criticism for years on healthcare, still have a 13 point advantage on the issue, while Republicans have only a three point advantage on taxes. Of course, this battling over discrete issues can obscure larger truths that emerge from the Battleground studies. The last Battleground survey found voters uniting behind a central platform of the Democratic Party, with a majority of voters agreeing with the statement that “government should do more to solve problems and meet the needs of people” (52%), compared to 43% who said “government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals.” This sentiment was backed not only by the ascendant coalition that is becoming the bedrock of the Democratic base, i.e. voters under 35 (51%), Hispanics (56%), African Americans (79%), and single women (70%), but also groups among whom Democrats have suffered setbacks in recent
midterm elections, like independent women (56%), seniors (50%), and white women (51%).

A Foreign Policy Election?

While Republicans enjoy a prominent advantage on which party is better suited to handle foreign affairs (50%-40%), including a commanding lead among independents (47%-29%), the issue does not appear ready to dominate the issue agenda in the same way that domestic economic issues will. Still, a significant minority of voters is worried about a terrorist attack (39% worried, 60% not worried). This fear is more prevalent among women (42% worried compared to 37% among men) and with more intensity—and is most pronounced among older women (57% worried). The Democratic nominee will need to reassure older women on security to win.

Any reticence among Republican hawks that existed in the years following the disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq has dissipated, as evidenced by their apparent support for war with Iran. A key difference in the national mood, however, is that a slim majority of voters approve of the Administration’s work to combat ISIS (51% approve, 41% disapprove). While terrorist attacks and the ongoing conflicts with ISIS will remain wild cards in the political arena, the one foreign policy issue that will draw in all the major political players is the proposal to limit Iran’s capacity to produce nuclear weapons.

Currently 64% of voters say they are aware of the proposed agreement between the five permanent members of the Security Council (plus Germany) and Iran, while 34% of voters say they are unaware. The Administration clearly needs to do a better job communicating their stance on the issue if they fear political pressure will dictate the position of hawkish Democrats looking for cover or moderate Republicans looking to move on from the belligerent tone of the Bush years. As of now, Republicans are clearly doing a better job communicating on the issue than Democrats. Fully seven-in-ten Republicans (70%) have heard of the proposed nuclear deal, compared to 68% of independents and only 57% of Democrats. Those who are aware of the deal are split on the issue, with 46% saying the Senate should vote to approve the deal and 47% saying they should vote to disapprove it. Democrats are slightly more likely to say they are for it (77% for, 16% against) than Republicans are to say they are against it (20% for, 74% against), while independents are much more divided (42% for, 50% against). Significant work needs to be done to engage Millennials on this issue, as they are the age cohort least likely to have heard of the deal (only 54% are aware, compared to 73% of seniors) but most likely to be supportive of it among those who are familiar with it (54% in favor, compared to 38% of seniors).

2016 Outlook

The early approval ratings for the announced (and presumed) presidential candidates underscore the challenge facing lesser known candidates to expand their base and the necessity of the more popular candidates to expand their brand. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Governor Jeb Bush, the most well-known and talked about contenders, are in very different positions. Hillary’s image is split among all voters (47% favorable, 48% unfavorable), and she is beloved by Democrats (84% favorable), while Bush’s image is more solidly net-negative (35%-48%) and divides Republicans. Hillary is supported most by her base of Millennials (56% favorable), women (54%), African Americans (82%), Liberals (79%), single women (71%), and Latinos (61%); among all Democrats, Hillary has a commanding 84% favorable rating.
Meanwhile, Governor Bush faces more serious problems within the Republican base. Although a majority of Republicans hold a favorable opinion of him (57%), more than one-quarter (26%) say they view him unfavorably. Jeb’s favorable ratings are higher than his lesser known competitors, but he has by far the highest negative ratings. Moreover, just 36% of voters say they would consider voting for Jeb compared to 60% who say they would not. However, at least at this stage in the campaign, this may be as much of a proxy for partisanship and name ID as it is anti-Bush feelings. In fact, a majority of voters say they would not consider voting for almost every candidate, including Huckabee (54%), Paul (55%), Clinton (51%), Rubio (50%), and Cruz (55%).

Somewhat surprisingly, among Republicans former Governor Mike Huckabee is the most popular candidate overall (58% favorable, 16% unfavorable) suggesting that his reputation as a niche candidate among Evangelicals and southern Populists may be misguided. Senators Marco Rubio and Rand Paul are both popular, but less well known among Republicans (56%-10% and 53%-20%, respectively). Meanwhile despite their widespread media coverage and backing in early primary states, Senator Ted Cruz (45% favorable, 15% unfavorable) and Governor Scott Walker (39% favorable, 6% unfavorable) have considerable room to grow if they are able to expand their name ID.

Even more interesting at this stage is examining where the Republican candidates stand among their party’s political base. While we would expect the eventual nominee to rally the party faithful once the primaries are over, there is a significant risk—as a result of the GOP primary process—of being pigeonholed as out of step. For example, while a majority of Republicans say they would consider voting for Jeb Bush (59%), more than one-third say they would not (36%). A political base may provide oxygen but it may also limit the ability to build a winning coalition, as the danger of being labeled unacceptable by the base impacts candidates from every wing of the party – from the self-styled libertarian Rand Paul (31% of Republicans would not consider voting for) to the evangelical Huckabee (29% would not consider) or the Tea Party devotee Ted Cruz (27% would not consider). Governor Walker (66% would consider voting for, 21% would not) and Senator Rubio (68% would consider, 23% would not) at this point have the highest ceilings as candidates, which given their ideological flexibility it not likely a coincidence. Of course, if the field remains fragmented and the litany of candidates continues to grow, then these candidates could win many primaries, and presumably even the nomination given the winner-take-all rules in most states, with as little as 25% to 30% of the vote.

However, the Republican politicians who think they will find political salvation and national relevance by placating the Steve King Republicans of Western Iowa will be sorely disappointed. In 2015 it remains a controversial question for many Republican politicians if they would attend the gay wedding of a friend or family member, but the voters are far more evolved on this matter, with an overwhelming majority of Americans (63%) saying they would attend a same sex marriage ceremony of a loved one. Still, the primary politics of the matter remain challenging for Republican candidates and their conservative base. Many core groups of the Republican base say they would not attend a gay wedding, including only 29% of very conservative voters, 24% of Evangelicals, and 34% of strong Tea Party supporters who say they would attend.

But perhaps the most surprising finding of the survey, and the most important indicator for voters and politicians of both parties in the next 18 months, is how much voters want the next President to value pragmatism and results over ideology. A clear majority of voters (57%) say they would vote for the most effective person over someone who holds views closet to their own (35%), a sentiment that holds up
across partisan and demographic subgroups. Republicans (58% most effective person, 34% views closest to my own), Democrats (57%-37%), and independents (54%-36%) are all in agreement.

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With his administration heading into what the President has often referred to as “the 4th quarter”, the prospective candidates for President will be best served by focusing on a bold and forward-thinking agenda that will deliver tangible results for the American people, especially on matters of economic opportunity and security. The Democratic Party should look for its leaders to make their case for a government that is active, engaged, and accountable in its efforts to put ordinary Americans and their families first for a change, and in so doing, restore the promise of the American Dream.